

Title:

Effectiveness of One-year Participation in school -Based Volunteer-Facilitated Peer Support Groups

Source:

Wassef, A., Mason, G., Lassiter Collins, M., Van Haalen, J., & Ingham, D. Effectiveness of One-Year Participation in School-Based Volunteer-Facilitated Peer Support Groups  
*Adolescence* 33(129) 1998: 91-97.

Email and Web Addresses: None

Conclusion:

The authors did indicate that the results of their study may not be generalizable due to the lack of demographic information and the size of the school. They also pointed out an argument researchers may have with their findings. Which was the voluntary nature of the groups. They stated that the voluntary nature of the groups implied that students who participated in them had minimal psychopathology and more supportive families, which made them more likely to join. The authors pointed out that 74% had used alcohol and drugs and that a quarter had considered dropping out of school. These were issues the authors said the families had not been able to resolve. Another argument that the authors stated they would not be able to refute was that the members of the group had a high level of motivation to change. Without a control group this possibility cannot be ruled out. The authors felt confident that the results they got on the surveys were not tainted by the need to give "socially acceptable" answers, as the survey was anonymous. They also don't think the results are due to "group loyalty" as the differences in the reported efficacy.

The results of this one-year study indicate high school age students who may be experiencing mild emotional distress can benefit from school-based volunteer-facilitated peer support groups. Having the groups on school campus and billed as self-help groups removed the stigma of receiving services. The program is low cost and designed to reach a significant number of students within a school.

Purpose:

This study looked at the effectiveness of participation in a school-based volunteer led peer support groups for one year. In 1990-91, a Student Assistance Program was started in a Texas high school. The support group topics included: substance use and how to remain abstinent; the effects of substance use by a relative or a friend; parental divorce and remarriage, grief, school, family, relationships and self image: abuse (physical, sexual or emotional); body image; the dual role of parent and student; depression and minority issues.

Students could self refer or a concerned other could refer a student for inclusion in the groups. Participation in the groups was voluntary, but limited to those students who were suffering only moderate distress. Students with serious pathology were referred to outside resources. A screening team evaluated applicants. 118 students, 14-19 years old, participated in weekly 50 minute long group sessions. Students could drop out of the group, but new students were not

admitted. The authors did not indicate if all 118 students stayed in the Student Assistance Program for the entire year.

#### Findings:

76 out of 118 participants responded to the end of the year survey. Out of the 76 respondents, two thirds indicated that their alcohol and drug use had gone down. The study also shows an improvement in participant's school attendance with 37.5% reporting increased attendance, 47.3% reported improvement in their schoolwork and 50.94% had a better attitude about school. Only 38% of respondents reported a positive effect from the program on their school attendance, 55% reported improvement on their physical health, but 76% noted an improvement in finding different ways to deal with their problems.

A majority of the students expressed some uncomfortable feeling when they first started the group but only 3.2% reported feeling uncomfortable at the end of the group. The students also reported a reduction in drug and alcohol use and disciplinary actions, improvement in attendance, and dropout rates. The success of this program is attributed to several factors. A group consisting of school representatives and community leaders helped in developing the program philosophy and procedures. This process along with the use of school and community volunteers created a sense of school and community ownership.

#### Implication for Prevention:

From this study it appears that school based support groups are an effective method for assisting students with social and emotional issues. Participating in a peer support group may help students make supportive friendships and connections that they might not have made without the group. The program was well accepted by students and community, which lead to school and community ownership. It should be noted this program should be promoted as a self-help group, not a group for students with problem behaviors. The authors did not explore in this article the issue of liability with volunteers leading the groups.

#### Summary Provided By:

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